

Chuck Berry: The First Poet of Rock and Roll

by Peter Stone Brown

On a hot night in July 1969, I was standing with at least a thousand other people on the narrow road that led to Wollman Rink in Central Park, waiting to get into the late show of a concert featuring John Lee Hooker, Chuck Berry and The Byrds, that as part of the Schaefer Music Festival cost a whopping two dollars. Suddenly the entire line in front of me jumped off the road and onto the grass. A black Cadillac came down the road away from the rink, with one person inside, the driver, Chuck Berry. That was as close as I got to Chuck Berry that night, and as close as I got period. It didn't matter what the contract said, it didn't matter thousands were there to see him, Chuck Berry did one show a night and that was that.

Several years later I tried to see him again at a club called Alexander's in Browns Mills, New Jersey. The place was packed, and every once in a while I managed a glimpse of the top of Berry's head. I didn't try again and it didn't really matter. Chuck Berry was notorious for bad shows. He refused to have his own band, and promoters would wind up hiring the cheapest band they could get, figuring every band could play Chuck Berry songs, which wasn't necessarily the case. They may have known the songs, playing them right is a different matter. That said, I've spent a lot of time since Berry's death Saturday trying to think of a musician in my lifetime who had a greater influence, because every kid who's picked up an electric guitar since 1955 did it whether they realize it or not because of Chuck Berry.

Chuck Berry knew exactly where his music came from. Check out this clip of the Tonight Show from 1987 where Johnny Carson in one of his finer moments, realizing he was in the presence of greatness cancelled his other guests while the show was happening and devoted the entire show to Berry. Berry says exactly what he was trying to do, and where it came from.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdnFsSiUFjk>

Add in country music and the Western Swing of Bob Wills to the mix ("Maybelline" borrows heavily from Wills' "Ida Red," and the realization sets in that Berry was working firmly in what the folkies of the '50s and '60s called the folk tradition.

Berry was 29 when his first single "Maybelline" became a hit, not young by rock and roll standards. His look, his duck walk, and that he used his guitar as a weapon (his licks were actually answering his lyrics) surely scared the shit out of millions of white parents. Songs like "School Days," still the best depiction of high school didn't ease their fears. In 1962 he was busted for violation of the Mann Act and sentenced to prison though he didn't serve

the full term. By all accounts he emerged a changed and bitter man. He still managed a few hits such as the “School Days” rewrite, “No Particular Place To Go,” “Nadine,” and “You Never Can Tell.” His only number one hit was the unfortunate “My Ding A Ling” in 1972.

It was however in his lyrics that Berry’s true genius emerged. Most of his songs tell a story, his use of imagery, making up words when he had to – was “motorvatin’” used before Chuck Berry? – was beyond brilliant. Put his lyrics on paper and they read like pure poetry, flowing effortlessly in perfect meter. Take this verse from “Promised Land,” and every other verse in the song is its equal.

Swing low sweet chariot, come down easy
Taxi to the terminal zone;
Cut your engines, cool your wings,
And let me make it to the telephone.

That use of language is in all his best songs, the reason why his songs were covered by hundreds of musicians and played for more than half a century in bars around the world. And it’s why most people of my generation know the words to “Sweet Little 16” without even thinking about it. Chuck Berry set the standard for rock and roll lyric writing.

As news of Berry’s death spread, my Facebook news feed was close to all tributes to Berry, and several people commented, “The real king of rock and roll.” I don’t like to think like that. They were all great for different reasons. Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis were simply fireballs of energy. Berry was a bit more sophisticated and his energy was in his guitar. John Lennon once said, “If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it Chuck Berry,” and that pretty much sums it up.